

COVER STORY

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*James M. McGowan
& March 9*

POWER TERROR

A murderous explosion in the heart of New York City raises the specter of terrorism in America and sets off a feverish hunt for the bomber

By RICHARD LACAYO

Americans were not accustomed to what so much of the world had already grown weary of: the sudden, deafening explosion of a car bomb, a hail of glass and debris, the screams of innocent victims followed by the wailing sirens of ambulances. Terrorism seemed like something that happened somewhere else—and somewhere else a safe distance over the horizon.

And then last week, in an instant, the World Trade Center in New York City became ground zero.

At 12:18 on a snowy Friday afternoon, a massive explosion rocked the foundation of the Twin Towers of the Trade Center in lower Manhattan—the second tallest build-

Rescue workers administer oxygen to a woman suffering from smoke inhalation as they evacuate her from the World Trade Center

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Helicopters rescued 23 people from the roof

Thick, black smoke, drawn up through stairwells and elevator shafts, reached the top of the 110-story towers within minutes of the explosion

TOWER ONE

TOWER TWO

VISTA HOTEL

The blast occurred at the end of a 100 ft. (30 m) ramp to a garage under the Vista Hotel

Concourse

PATH terminal

PATH tracks

Parking Level 1

Parking Level 2

Parking Level 3

The explosion blew a crater 200 ft. by 100 ft. (60 m by 30 m), blasted a 180 ft. (55 m) hole in the wall above the PATH station, and collapsed the station's concrete ceiling

TIME Graphics by Nigel Holmes. Source: AP

ings in the world and a magnet for 100,000 workers and visitors each day. The bomb was positioned to wreak maximum damage to the infrastructure of the building and the commuter networks below. And the landmark target near Wall Street seemed chosen with a fine sense for the symbols of the late 20th century. If the explosion, which killed five people and injured more than 1,000, turns out to be the work of terrorists, it will be a sharp reminder that the world is still a dangerous place. And that the dangers can come home.

Against that threat, the relevant intelligence agencies mobilized quickly. The news from New York sent the FBI and other federal agencies to Code Red, their highest



state of readiness. The FBI activated its Joint Terrorist Task Force, and the CIA turned up the heat at its Counterterrorist Center in Langley, Virginia, a conglomerate of psychiatrists, explosives experts and hostage negotiators. Meanwhile, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the agency responsible for investigating the loss and theft of explosives, mobilized its 13-member National Response Team held on 24-hour call in the New York area. They were joined by bureau chemists from headquarters in Rockville, Maryland.

Until it is firmly concluded that a terrorist was responsible, the New York City police department is in charge, and it was the N.Y.P.D. that took the lead in sifting through the 19 telephoned claims of "cred-

it" that were received in the first 24 hours. Though none came in before the blast—the earliest followed it by an hour, well after the first news reports—a few were intriguing. Many of the calls were made by people claiming to be affiliated with Balkan groups, including one made by a caller in Europe who said he represented the Black Hand, a Serbian extremist organization last active about 10 years ago. According to terrorism expert Xavier Raufer, Serbian nationalists have threatened terrorist reprisals against West European countries for interference in the region.

There were immediate suspicions that Bill Clinton's decision last week to air-drop relief supplies over Bosnia—a step that had seemed like a low-risk humani-

Scores of emergency vehicles, including many from nearby cities, sped to the scene to help rescue the injured

tarian gesture—might have been answered in thunder by the Serbs. Still, the Bosnian hypothesis was by no means the only one. A caller from the West Coast credited the Iranian Revolutionary Guard; an anonymous tipster blamed Jewish extremist groups.

Because of their trouble getting to the "blast seat" in the dangerously crumbling underground garage, investigators could not even confirm to their complete satisfaction what had caused the explosion. But its size and intense heat suggested a bomb, as did traces of nitrate found at the edges of



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Rescuers help one of the injured; hundreds suffered cuts and smoke inhalation

Deshane, 25, was on the 105th floor when he felt the explosion. "All the computers shut down, then all the phones shut down," he said. "Then all of a sudden we saw smoke everywhere." He ran to hit the fire-emergency button. "Nothing happened." In a panic, some people broke windows to admit air, sending daggers of glass raining onto the crowds below and creating a chimney effect that drew smoke upward even more quickly.

Four of the dead were Port Authority workers, whose offices and locker rooms were located on the lower levels that sustained the worst damage. More than 24 hours after the blast, two other workers were still missing. But the toll was less severe than first feared. Though some suffered major injuries, most of the victims

the blast crater. Until they could determine otherwise, informed experts assumed that hundreds of pounds of high explosives had been packed into a car or van that was left at a four-level underground parking garage. The garage is situated below the Trade Center plaza and near a station of the PATH commuter subway line that links Manhattan and New Jersey.

The Trade Center is not a surprising target. In the early 1970s CIA agents compiled a list of potentially vulnerable sites that they believed might make high-value terrorist strike points. Near the top of that list, former deputy CIA director Bobby Inman told TIME, was the World Trade Center. "When the people responsible for anticipating terrorist attacks began to run scenarios on this kind of thing, this was one of the places." Why? "Because of the number of victims who would be involved," said Inman. The information raises questions about what kind of extra precaution the Port Authority might have taken in light of the building's tantalizing vulnerability.

The bomb blew out a crater 200 ft. by 100 ft. wide and five stories deep. Floors collapsed onto one another with an impact that caused the ceiling of the PATH station nearby to come crashing down, showering chunks of concrete onto commuters waiting on the platform. In the same mo-

ment, the 110-story Twin Towers swayed visibly as the force of the blast shuddered upward. Lobby windows exploded onto the plaza and marble slabs fell from the walls. As fractured steam pipes launched jets of hot mist into the air, the first victims stumbled out of the buildings, bloodied and in shock.

Fires quickly broke out, launching thick, acrid smoke up hundreds of stairwells and elevator banks. In both towers the electricity went out, including emergency backup systems. Even on the highest floors, workers were stunned by the speed at which smoke flew upward. David

were treated for smoke inhalation or minor burns.

In a meeting late Friday evening, the state and federal agencies involved in the case hammered out a protocol to govern the inquiry. The first priority was to stabilize the pillars that hold up the Vista Hotel on the Trade Center plaza and which were supported in turn by the garage floors that were ripped away in the blast. Before investigators can safely enter the blast site, workers must buttress the dangerous sagging remnants of the garage and lay a web of tubular steel beams across the crater left by the bomb. It may be days before in-

POWERFUL TOOLS OF DESTRUCTION

WHEN INVESTIGATORS DIG THROUGH THREE FLOORS OF RUBBLE TO REACH THE "BLAST SEAT," they will begin to find the telltale traces—detonator fragments, chemical residue, heat indicators—that point toward a specific explosive compound. Among the possibilities:

SEMTEX This yellowish plastic explosive, one-third more powerful than an equivalent amount of TNT, has a texture like putty; it can be molded into almost any shape. It is also easy to transport. "You can drop it, you can throw it against a wall, you can stomp on it. It won't go off" without a detonator, says terrorism expert Robert Phillips. Composed in equal parts of RDX and PETN, both high explosives, Semtex was manufactured in Czechoslovakia. In 1990, Prague officials vowed to enforce an export ban; by then 1,000 tons had been shipped to Libya.

C-4 A relative of Semtex, this odorless, claylike high explosive is made in the U.S. and favored by NATO armies as well as by mining companies. Much like Semtex, C-4 converts to a gaseous state at very high velocity, sending forth shock waves at 26,400 ft. per sec.

TNT About twice as powerful as common dynamites but lower in explosive velocity than the plastics, trinitrotoluene is made of nitric acid, sulfuric acid and toluene. This toxic substance, typically bundled in ½-lb. and 1-lb. sticks, is commonly available in the U.S.

AMMONIUM NITRATE When used for benign purposes, this is known simply as fertilizer. But when mixed with diesel fuel and set off, it has a detonation velocity of 3,600 ft. per sec.

investigators can dig through the tons of debris for clues to the bomber.

Then the hard work begins. Once they enter the damaged area, investigators will face the tedious process of finding chemical traces and fragments of the vehicle to help identify the type of bomb. Most well-known terrorist groups have their own "signatures"—characteristic explosive compounds, detonators and even device designs. If investigators find enough clues, "they can detect who made this particular bomb," says Professor Robert Phillips, an expert in terrorism at the University of Connecticut. "They're able to detect even individual bomb-makers' ways of doing things, of placing wires, of placing fuses, how they put the whole thing together. There aren't lots of people in the world who do this well." At the top of Phillips' suspect list are Middle Eastern and Balkan terrorists. Says Phillips: "The car bomb is very much the signature of these groups."

ACCORDING TO INMAN, THE sheer difficulty of constructing bombs of this nature almost rules out an American-made device. "There hasn't been a domestic development of the kind of skills that are needed for this, as there has been in Northern Ireland or the Middle East," says Inman.

Outside experts liken the task of identifying the Trade Center bomb to the inquiry into the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, in which debris was scattered for miles. Investigators in that case drew a life-size diagram of the plane on a warehouse floor, then set about reconstructing it piece by piece like a jigsaw puzzle. From that they could determine where in the plane's body the blast occurred, because "the metal would be bent to follow the contours of the vectors of the explosion," says Phillips.

Though the FBI does not yet know whether enough evidence is left to piece together the car bomb it believes was there, its experts plan to move large quantities of debris to a secure location and examine it with microscopic care. They will search for tiny remnants that don't really belong at the scene—that are not, say, part of a car's headlights or dashboard. Items as small as a bit of wire can point to whether a timing device was used.

The whole area will also be examined for chemical residue, which will help in determining what kind of explosive was used. In car bombings, bits of explosive matter are often found in the nooks and crannies of what is left of the auto's trunk lid. Nitrate, traces of which were found in the Trade Center crater, is the most basic component of most explosive mixtures. The next step is to find traces of chemicals that may be unique to a certain compound, like potassium or ammonium,

WHO COULD HAVE DONE IT

By PRISCILLA PAINTON

THE BOMBING OF THE WORLD TRADE CENTER COULD TURN OUT TO BE THE WORK OF none other than a psychotic, mad-as-hell American—a live version of the Hollywood revenge fantasy. But many aspects of the bomb, including its placement and force, carry the mark of more sophisticated hands. Experts who study terrorists around the world have begun to speculate about several groups:

THE BALKAN FACTIONS Of the 19 callers who took responsibility for the bombing, at least one said he spoke for an organization calling itself the Serbian Liberation Front. Another claimed to represent Croatian militants. Still another called in the name of Bosnian Muslims. The possibility of a Balkan connection was made more tantalizing by the fact that a bomb was defused on Friday near the U.S. embassy in the Croatian capital of Zagreb.

Most of the Balkan nationalities have a history of marrying politics with violence. It was the murder of Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo by a Serbian youth that set off World War I. And according to a French expert on the Balkans, Xavier Raufer, the terrorist techniques that the Palestinians and the Lebanese made notorious in the past two decades—bombings, kidnappings, hijackings—were virtually invented by Balkan groups. "These guys make Abu Nidal look like Mother Teresa," he says.

Militants seeking independence for Croatia have struck inside the U.S. in the past. In December 1975 Croatian nationalists were suspected of planting a bomb in a luggage locker at La Guardia Airport, killing 11 people and injuring 75. Less than a year later, Croats hijacked a TWA jet traveling from New York City to Chicago and eventually diverted it to Paris. As part of that operation, the group also planted a bomb at Grand Central Terminal, which killed a police officer who tried to defuse it. In June 1980 Croatian "freedom fighters" detonated a bomb inside the museum at the Statue of Liberty, but no one was injured. All told, Croats committed more than 20 acts of terror in the U.S. from 1976 through 1980.

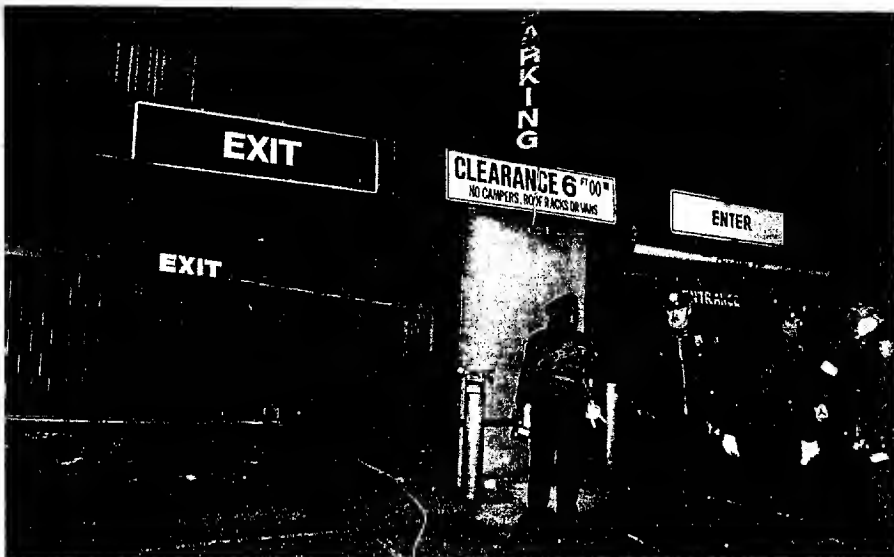
Croatia has achieved a shaky independence since then, albeit one marred by episodes of urban shelling by Serb guerrillas. The Croats could conceivably have been motivated to carry out the attack hoping the Serbs would be blamed. But the Serbs have their own reason for staging the bombing—or for doing it and hoping the Croats would be blamed. The announcement this week that the U.S. would soon start sending relief flights over Bosnia made it just as plausible that the blast might be a response by Serbs to a perceived tilt against their side. Six months ago, Serbian nationalists threatened to bomb Western's Europe's nuclear facilities if its governments intervened militarily in the former Yugoslavia.

The Bosnian Muslims too have reason to play a part in the Balkan blame game. They have been known to bomb their own people in Bosnia, hoping the Serbs and the Croats would be held responsible and Western allies would intervene on their side. But they are also angry at the Clinton Administration for refusing to lift an arms embargo despite earlier pledges to do so.

PALESTINIAN FACTIONS An extremist group called Hamas has been virulently opposed to the current Middle East peace talks, and last week's bombing could have been an attempt to torpedo the negotiations before they resume next month. In addition, it was Hamas supporters who made up most of the 400 or so Palestinians whom Israel expelled late last year and who now languish in the no-man's-land between the Israeli and Lebanese lines.

IRAN, IRAQ, LIBYA February was the second anniversary of the U.S.-led ground attack against Iraq; setting off a bomb at the center of America's largest city could have been Iraq's way of marking the date. But since Clinton took office, Iraq has been making conciliatory noises, as has another of the U.S.'s longtime enemies, Iran. However, there is no shortage of fundamentalist groups, including the Iranian-backed Hizballah, that might seek to punish the nation they regard as "the Great Satan."

RUSSIAN NATIONALISTS Long-shot culprits to be sure, Russian nationalists who want to install a reactionary, law-and-order regime in Moscow have blamed much of their country's troubles—from corruption to economic chaos and crime—on Western, and mainly U.S., influence. They have stepped up their attacks on Boris Yeltsin in recent months, forcing him to distance himself from free marketers and from his Western-oriented diplomacy. But so far he has survived their challenges. In frustration, his enemies might have sought expression on American soil. —Reported by William Mader/London and Thomas A. Sanction/Paris



Police cordoned off the entrance to the bombed-out garage, where the explosion left a gaping chasm

which would identify the explosive far more precisely.

Experts will also try to determine the velocity of the shock waves emanating from the blast. "Different compounds explode at different speeds," says Brian Jenkins, senior managing director for Kroll Associates, an international investigating firm. "You can tell by examining the metal that was torn apart. Was it a big explosion that moved a lot of things, or was it a high-velocity explosion that rent metal?" Sophisticated plastic explosives tend to shred metal and pulverize concrete, while common substances like dynamite tend to knock walls over and push vehicles around. Once investigators identify the substance, they will try to determine whether it was a homemade explosive, one made from commercially available material or a product of limited availability, like a military-grade explosive. If the material is common, the trail may be colder than if it is a closely monitored substance.

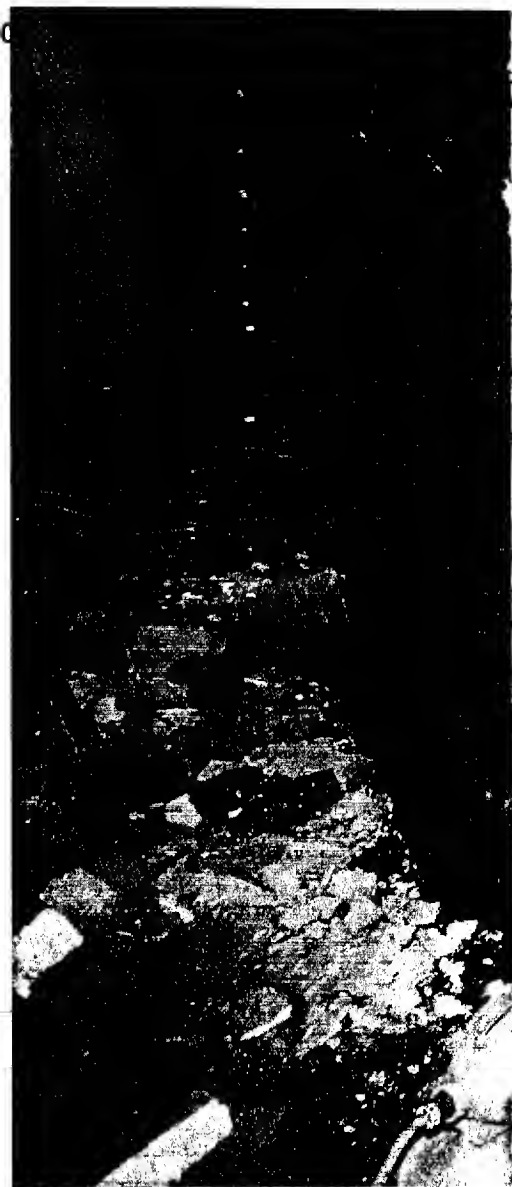
INITIAL SPECULATION IN THIS CASE centers upon plastic explosives like Semtex, the lethal weapon of choice for many terrorists because it is safe to handle and undetectable by sniffer dogs or X-ray inspection. A small amount hidden in a portable radio blew Pan Am Flight 103 out of the sky in 1988. Semtex was produced in quantity under the communist government of Czechoslovakia; while the post-communist Czech Republic has discontinued production, large quantities remain in the hands of terrorist gangs that obtained them illicitly. Three years ago, Czechoslovak President Vaclav Havel estimated that "world terrorism has supplies of Semtex to last 150 years."

Until last week, federal agents were confident that terrorist groups contemplating action on American soil would have considerable difficulty smuggling in enough high explosives to manufacture a sizable car bomb. Could they have obtained them in the U.S.? Although high explosives are widely used in the construction industry, they are monitored. **Approved For Release 2000/01/17 : CIA-RDP96-00789R000200010001-6**

close contacts with manufacturers and dealers, while sales are tightly regulated by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. Though the Pentagon possesses its own plastic explosive, a Semtex relative called C-4, a would-be terrorist would have to steal it from a military facility—a theft that would probably be detected. Other explosives might be simpler to accumulate, however, like ammonium nitrate, an ordinary component of fertilizer that has been a favorite of the Irish Republican Army.

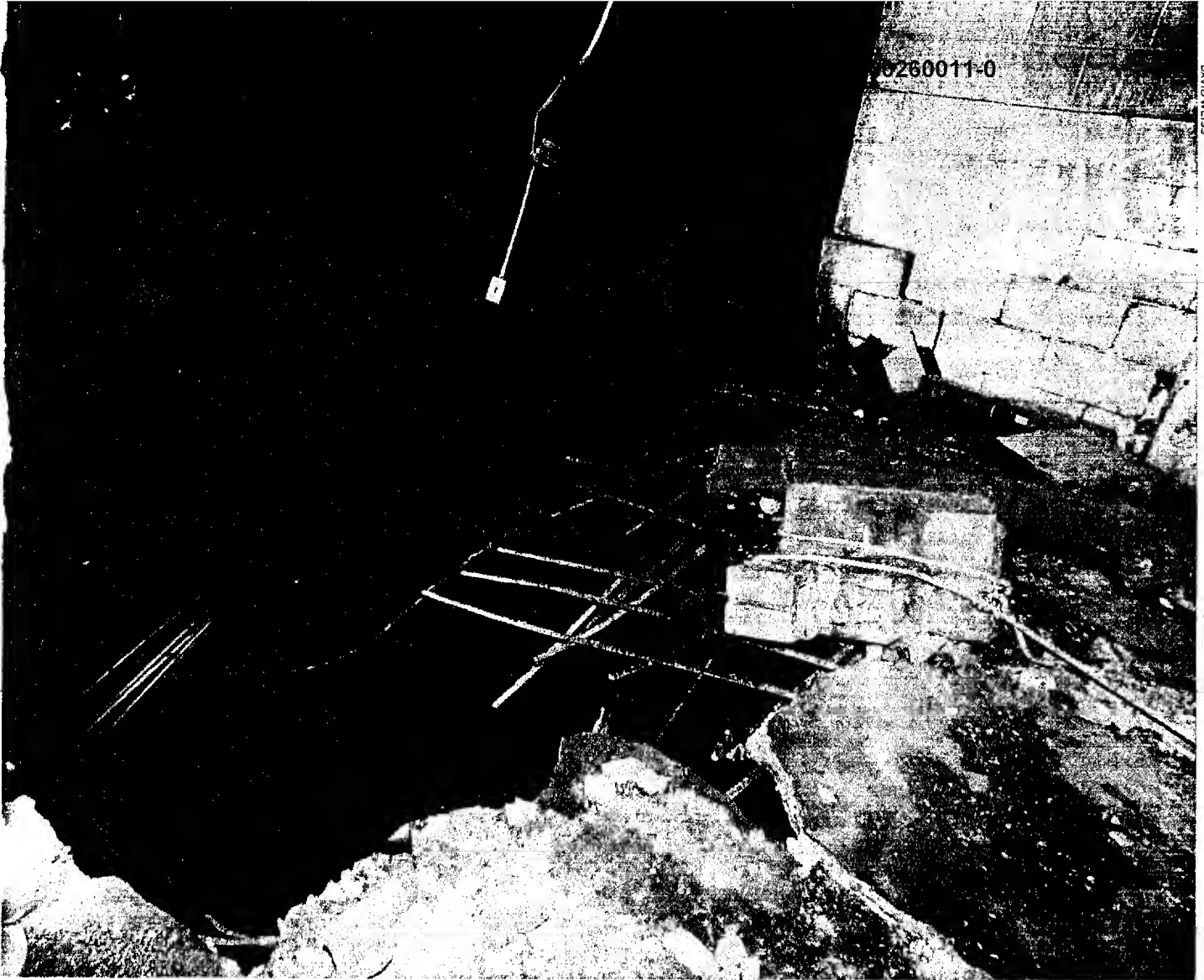
Experts speculate that the bomb may have consisted of several hundred pounds of high explosives. The bomber may have known that because the device would be detonated in the reinforced enclosure of a garage, it would deliver more bang for the buck. An enclosed area can double the "shock wave" value of an explosion. "When you have a contained explosion, the blast doesn't vent," says Phil Hough, president of International Explosives Disposal (USA). "Effectively the building becomes part of the bomb." Says Phillips: "The garage was the perfect location because of both the damage to the upper floors [with smoke] and structural damage the bomb would cause at the base."

Once more is known about the methods and materials of the bomber, federal agencies can compare them with the details of past bombings that are stored on its computer data base. There is also a massive job ahead of identifying and interviewing witnesses who may have seen something in the parking garage or the building. And the FBI is intensifying surveillance of possible terrorist groups and foreign agents suspected of involvement in the bombing. The bureau has also infiltrated potential terrorist groups in this country, as the CIA has done overseas. Those contacts can now be used to gather leads. "You're going to have to depend on informants," says former CIA official David Whipple. "And you almost always



Investigators will look at every possible motive, from Balkan nationalism to employee dissatisfaction at the Trade Center. "You can't take just one track, because you come to dead ends and you've lost time," says an FBI official. "You have to investigate multiple tracks at the same time." Eventually, with luck, the pieces start coming together. "Some of it is misinformation, some of it is disinformation," says Jenkins, "and some small portion is information. You have to sort all that out. In the ideal situation, these paths begin to converge. You get a chain of physical evidence that takes you all the way from the debris back to the perpetrator."

Will the perpetrator be carrying a flag? Says former CIA Director Robert Gates: "It's always been a possibility that, as ethnic conflicts spread, the losers might try to exact some sort of price, to attract attention to their cause." But it was by no means certain last week that the Trade Center bombing was an act of political terrorism. During the Gulf War, a bomb found on a chemical storage tank in Virginia instantly raised an alarm. The businessman who



hoped to make an insurance-fraud fire look like the work of Iraqis.

Yet even before the answers were in as to who had planted the bomb, a new question—whether a season of terrorism might begin in the U.S.—had been raised. In the wake of the explosion, bomb threats forced the evacuation of the Empire State Building and Newark airport. Both threats were false, but no one was ready to dismiss the likelihood of another assault. Around the country, airports and other public facilities stepped up security. The blast was a reminder of the vulnerability of most American office buildings, shopping malls, airports and railway stations. Even the U.S. government has let its guard down since the mid-1980s, when American installations were on constant alert and concrete barriers were set up around many government buildings in Washington.

"International terrorism in the '80s was fundamentally fueled by the cold war," says Phillips, "and you can almost date the diminution of that terrorism with Gorbachev's ascension to power." But the end of communism has helped ignite the

fires of nationalism in regions like the Balkans, emboldening other fanatical groups to sow the kind of trouble once created by Soviet and East bloc terrorists.

As the only remaining superpower, the U.S. can find itself the target of resentments of players on all sides who are seeking American involvement or trying to fend it off. Massive car bombs have become familiar as political weapons in the Middle East and Europe. But it would represent a quantum leap in terrorist capabilities—and brazenness—to assemble one in the U.S. Middle East terror networks, for one, have never shown themselves to be capable of that or interested in doing so, preferring to concentrate their attacks on Westerners in Europe, where they have found it easier to operate.

Whoever the bomber was, he made an indelible statement. On top of the deaths and injuries, the bomb's damage to the heart of New York City's financial district will bring heavy costs. Repairs and restoration alone will cost the Port Authority as much as \$100 million, according to one estimate. But the disruption to business will be even worse, because the Port Authority

will have to close the giant complex for at least several days for structural and safety work. The towers, which represent about 10% of all the office space in Manhattan's financial district, are so large that they have two ZIP codes.

Perhaps the most unsettling possibility is that the hand behind the blast will never reveal itself and never be discovered by anyone else. Though two Libyan intelligence agents were indicted in the downing of Pan Am 103, they have never been brought to trial, and no nation or group ever came forward to take responsibility. Just blocks from the World Trade Center, the walls of the Morgan Guaranty Trust Co. are still scarred from the effects of a bomb that was hidden in a horse-drawn wagon on Sept. 16, 1920. When it exploded into a lunchtime crowd, 40 people died and 200 were injured. The mystery of the blast was never cleared up. The investigators who have begun scratching through the rubble of the Trade Center are determined that this flash of terror will not go unsolved.

—Reported by Edward Barnes, Sophronia Scott Gregory/New York and Michael Duffy, Jay Peterzell/Washington